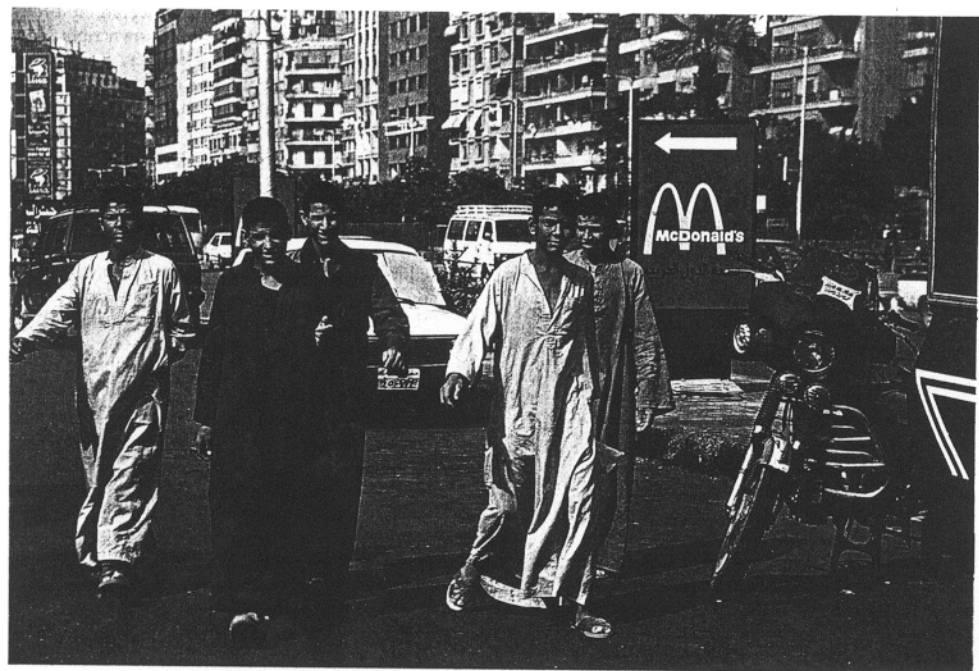


10.7.01

The Way We Live Now



A HOMEGROWN CULTURE WAR

lies and bizarre legal maneuvers have been the hallmark of Ragab weirki's trial, a trial that has put the private life of the wealthy businessman, owner of the popular clothing-store chain Al Tawheed Wa Al or, in the spotlight. ... The saucy details of his marriages, and illicit affairs he's allegedly had, have been too hot for a conservative public andie. In fact, it may be one of the reasons Judge Lutfi Hassanein kicked out reporters, relatives and other nonlawyers from court proceedings. ... That, of course, was upled with the fact that the court was severely overcrowded." ia Dabbous, from the Aug. 30-Sept. 5 issue of The Cairo Times

Nowhere Man

Islam alone didn't produce Mohamed Atta. He was born of his country's struggle to reconcile modernity with tradition.

By Fouad Ajami

I almost know Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian who may have been at the controls of the jet that crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. I can almost make him out. I have known Egypt for nearly three decades, and so much of Atta's life falls neatly in place for me. I can make out the life of the 33-year-old man, one of a vast generation of younger Egyptians making their claims on a crowded land, picking their way through the cultural confusion that has settled upon the country in recent years.

Atta's father, a well-off but strict lawyer, has giv-

en foreign reporters' comments of the life. I done it in an angry way: raged as much by claim his son is a hijacker as reports that his son might have been drinking vodka before he boarded An Airlines Flight 11. "W our doors closed," th Atta said, "and that my two daughters and son are academically morally excellent."

The father was giving to the Egyptian bourgeois discipline and anxieties desire to keep its world norms intact. From the still: "He was so gentle. to tell him, 'Tough boy.'" So much of the w-

younger Egyptians is given away in that admon-

There had come to Egypt great ruptures in the when the younger Atta came into his own. / austere society had suddenly been plunged more competitive, glamorized world in the 1970s and 1980's. The old pieties of Egypt were at war with temptations. There must have been great yearning repression in Mohamed Atta's life; it is the torn Atta's generation. They were placed perilously to modernity, but they could not partake of it.

The place affected an unaccustomed hipness new hotels, the cultural clutter of Europe and America, the steady traffic of foreign tourists through the air intimations of more emancipated ways constricted, repressed lands. But the sons and daughters were to be chaste, and the old prohibition to be asserted with increasing stridency.

An easy secularism had once been the vEgypt, and a measure of banter between men and women. Never as tranquil as its legend, but a hard and soft country all the same, Egypt knew a c-

Fouad Ajami, professor of Middle Eastern studies at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, is author, most recently, of "The Dream Palace of the Arabs."

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wholeness and prided itself on a fairly vibrant cultural life. This had given way by the time young Atta, born in 1968, made his way to the university.

On the crowded campuses where Atta and his peers received an education — an education that put off the moment of reckoning with a country that had little if any room for them, little if any hope — there emerged an anxious, belligerent piety. Growing numbers of young women took to conservative Islamic dress — at times the veil, more often the head cover. While the secularists sneered, it became a powerful trend, a fashion in its own right. It was a way of marking a zone of privacy, a declaration of moral limits. Young men picked up the faith as well, growing their beards long and finding their way into Islamist political movements and religious cells. A cultural war erupted in the land of Egypt. A stranger who knew the ways of this land could see the stresses of the place growing more acute by the day.

The sermons of the country — religious and political, the words of those who monitored and dominated its cultural life — insisted on a false harmony, held on to the image of the good, stable society that kept the troubles and the "perversions" of the world at bay. But the outwardly obedient sons and daughters were in the throes of a seething rebellion. In an earlier age, Egyptians had been known as a people who dreaded quitting their native soil. In more recent years, younger Egyptians gave up on the place, came to dream of fulfillment — economic, personal, political — in foreign lands. Mohamed Atta, who left for Germany in 1993, was part of that migration, of that rupturing of things on the banks of the Nile.

Religion came to Atta unexpectedly, in Hamburg, where he had gone for a graduate degree in urban planning. In *bilad al kufr* (the countries of unbelief), he needed the faith as consolation, and it was there that he sharpened it as a weapon of war. He styled himself emir, commander, of a religious cell. But the liberties, the temptations, still tugged at him; there were those reports from south Florida of drinking and video games. Mohamed Atta carried the contradictions of his worlds, the new liberties and the medieval theology side by side. The man who willingly flew into a tower of glass and steel for the faith broke one of the canons of the faith.

The modern world unsettled Atta. He exalted the traditional, but it could no longer give him a home. He drifted in "infidel" lands but could never be fully at ease. He led an itinerant life. The magnetic power of the American imperium had fallen across his country. He arrived here with a presumption, and a claim. We had intruded into his world; he would shatter the peace of ours. The glamorized world couldn't be fully had; it might as well be humbled and taken down.

It must have been easy work for the recruiters who gave Atta a sense of mission, a way of doing penance for the liberties he had taken in the West, and the material means to live the plotter's life. A hybrid kind has been forged across that seam between the civilization of Islam and the more emancipated culture of the West. Behold the children, the issue, of this encounter as they flail about and rail against the world in no-man's-land. ■